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ABSTRACT

The revised Oregon high school graduation requirements, adopted in 1972, are an attempt to respond to attacks on the schools and to clarify the purposes of schooling. The uniqueness of the Oregon approach lies in the mechanism for bringing about change in the schools--a radically revised set of requirements for high school graduation. The focus of the revised graduation requirements is on identification and student achievement of minimum survival competencies in three broad areas: personal development, social responsibility, and career development. The initial focus on specifying, developing, and evaluating pupil competencies provides an opportunity to consider the support and resource needs of the schools as they design and implement mastery learning strategies. The competency-based learning strategies will focus on the specification of competencies, the design and implementation of continuous feedback evaluation systems as students move through the learning experiences, and the summative certification of achievement of the competencies. Research and development related to these issues can improve the knowledge base and provide direction to other states and local education agencies as they seek to bring about reform through the competencies approach. (Author/IRT)

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GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS AS A VEHICLE FOR CHANGE

Thomas A. Olson

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One hundred years ago a city newspaper strongly criticized the public schools on the grounds of unwarranted expenditures, general mismanagement and a "frill-filled" curriculum. The editorial stated, in part:

> "The only way to save the public school system from extirpation as a nuisance is to reform it. If the General Assembly will pass a bill restricting the studies in all public schools to the English branches, excluding all the singular flub dubs and fribbles . . . it will be a grand reform."

The editor charged the schools with turning out "expensive blockheads without even the rudiments of a common school education." High schools were charged with being "tax eating monopolies."

The debate over the purposes of schooling and sharp attacks on the educational system have not subsided over the past century. Daily, one can find attacks similar to the one made by the editor 100 years ago.

The revised Oregon high school graduation requirements, adopted in 1972, are an attempt to respond to these attacks and to clarify the purposes of schooling. The uniqueness of the Oregon approach lies with the mechanism for bringing about change in the schools--a radically revised set of requirements for high school graduation.

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The focus of the revised graduation requirements is on identification and student achievement of minimum "survival" competencies in three broad areas: personal development, social responsibility and career development.

Development of this competencies concept can move in one of two directions. Specifying and evaluating learning outcomes, if approached in a narrow and mechanistic fashion, can only serve to strengthen a rigid factory model of schooling--schooling which provides limited options and which has a dehumanizing impact. On the other hand, if approached from the broad perspective of developing in students the necessary skills and attitudes to cope with the world of change, implementation of the competencies concept can serve to be the focus for developing a more relevant and comprehensive set of learning experiences and settings. If approached from this broad perspective, there is the necessity to consider the multiple social functions which schools serve. A major attempt at restructuring learning experiences and settings can have significant impacts on the school as a social institution and on the roles and relationships of individuals and institutions.

The state of Oregon provides an ideal setting in which to consider the research and development needs of schools as they attempt to implement a competencies concept which is broadly conceived.

In introducing the new graduation requirements the Oregon State Department of Education makes it clear that the strategy is a broadly conceived one:

> By 1978, the typical senior year may be dramatically different than it is today. As many

> as one-third of the seniors could be enrolled in a nearby community college full or part time. Another third could be working in community service activities full or part time. And the other one-third would probably remain in the school-based program. . .
>
> The new standards provide many freedoms for local school districts. It is no longer assumed that every student is a twelve-year learner. Districts may waive attendance requirements and develop eleven-, twelve- or even thirteen-year school programs based on the individual needs of students.

The new requirements' focus on development of competencies necessary for survival in the modern world is also seen in a broader context:

> The development of survival competencies is only one part of schooling. Local schools are encouraged to offer broad experience in the fine arts, humanities, foreign languages and the usual college preparatory program.

It is thus clear that the Oregon competencies concept is defined as an attempt to bring about significant modifications in the design of learning experiences and is seen as an attempt to liberalize the educational experience.

Consider first the tasks schools must carry out to implement these new requirements:

1. Setting Goals

   a) District goals in six life role areas:

      - Learner
      - Individual
      - Producer

- Citizen
- Consumer
- Family member

b) Program goals in 11 program areas which the minimum state standards require to be offered

- Communication skills
- Science
- Citizenship
- Physical education
- Visual and performing arts
- Mathematics
- Social studies
- Health education
- Music education
- Personal finance
- Career education

and in any other areas established by the district

c) Goal hierarchies for K - 12

- Lists of desired learner outcomes for each program offered by elementary and high schools

d) An identified set of policies and procedures for periodic review, revision and approval of goals

2. Assessment Procedures

a) Group Assessment

- Assessment of student groups in each of program areas, aggregating data to determine group needs and program design needs

b) Individual Assessment

- Assessment of each individual student indicating attainment of competencies in all program areas

- Determination of individual needs for diagnosis and prescription

c) Individual Interest Assessment

- Assessment of each individual student's interests and potential in all program areas
- Determination of individual needs

3. Program Improvement Procedures

- Setting/revising objectives
- Design of alternative learning experiences and alternative learning settings

4. Program Evaluation Procedures

- Schools must show evidence in high school course plans that student achievement of minimum competencies and course goals is used as the basis for evaluating the effectiveness of the instructional program.

5. Student Evaluation Procedures

- Schools must collect and maintain evidence of student attainment of minimum competencies for purposes of certification.

The above system in each school district must be operational by 1978.

The initial focus on specifying, developing and evaluating pupil competencies provides an opportunity to consider the support and resource needs of the schools as they design and implement mastery learning strategies. The competency-based learning strategies will focus on the specification of competencies, the design and implementation of learning experiences to achieve the competencies, the design and implementation of continuous feedback evaluation systems as students move through the learning experiences and the summative certification of achievement of the competencies. The

research and development support provided districts as they carry out these tasks will be critical. Research and development questions which need to be addressed are:

- What characteristics of the current system support the move toward competency based education?
- What characteristics of the current system inhibit the move toward competency based education?
- To what extent does needed knowledge base and human expertise exist in order to fully implement competency based education?
- What are the critical unmet needs for support systems to implement competency based education?
- What are the technological problems of measurement and evaluation prompted by competency based education?

A second set of questions centers on the impact on institutional and individual roles and relationships as competency based learning strategies are designed and implemented. Questions which need to be addressed in this category are:

- To what extent does implementation of the competency based concept influence the modes of carrying out the instruction, socialization, custodial, certification and selection functions?
- To what extent and in what way does implementation of the competency based concept influence processes and nature of curriculum planning?
- To what extent and in what way does implementation of competency based education influence teacher-administrator relationships?

- To what extent and in what way does implementation of competency based education influence teacher-student relationships?

- To what extent and in what way does implementation of competency based education influence school-community relationships?

The Oregon graduation requirements rest on several assumptions about the changes which can be brought about through implementation. From a research and development perspective Oregon provides an ideal setting in which to assess the impact of the schools' implementation of the requirements on changes in instructional, management and policy environments. The assumptions are:

(a) The identification and agreement upon specific student, professional and system competencies will improve the schools' sense of direction and therefore the schools' ability to develop a wider variety of learning strategies.

(b) In order to secure agreement on desired competencies, it is necessary to involve the community as well as professional educators in the process of defining goals and related competencies.

(c) Once desired competencies are agreed upon, educators will search for comprehensive sets of alternative learning processes and settings to assist students in achieving the competencies. The relationships among desired competencies, related learning processes and educational settings will become more direct and effective.

(d) Implementation of comprehensive sets of alternative learning processes and educational settings will lead to changes in individual and institutional roles and relationships and adjustments in the manner in which schools carry out instructional, socialization, custodial, certification and selection functions.

While in many ways unique, the Oregon setting should not be viewed in isolation of significant developments across the nation. Increasingly, state education departments are requiring more careful attention to the specification, development and measurement of learner outcomes. Whether these mandates are prompted by the public demand for "accountability" or a more broadly conceived motivation of bringing about school reform, there is clearly a national trend toward moving the context of educational planning from dealing primarily with concerns about educational inputs (numbers of teachers, classrooms, etc.) to the complex interrelationships among educational inputs, processes and outcomes.

There is a clear recognition among all the actors that the lack of a comprehensive knowledge base in educational planning and evaluation provides a major obstacle to effective implementation of the graduation requirements. Research and development related to these issues can, however, improve that knowledge base and provide direction to other states and local education agencies as they may seek to bring about reform through the competencies approach.